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ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Scotland's Local Government Workforce in 2024: What Elected Members Need to Know





Elected Members Briefing Series

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes are directly produced by IS staff but we also make available material from a wide range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. [All briefing notes](#) in the series can be accessed on the IS website.

About this briefing note

Scotland's councils are facing significant challenges in maintaining and developing workforce capacity caused by a range of factors including financial pressures; an ageing workforce; increased service demand; recruitment difficulties; differing population changes across the country; skills gaps and pay competition from other sectors.

This briefing note highlights the key points from the [Scotland's Local Government Workforce Report 2024](#), which details findings from a workforce survey commissioned by SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) and SPDS (Society of Personal and Development Scotland) and a review of local government workforce profiles by the Improvement Service.

This briefing outlines examples of good practice to tackle workforce issues, and suggests questions and actions elected members can take to address these pressures



What is the issue and why does it matter?

A strong, appropriately resourced and appropriately skilled local government workforce is vital to deliver the council of the future and the level of service transformation and public sector reform that is required if we are to collectively meet the needs of Scotland's communities. The research found a range of challenges currently facing the local government workforce that include:

- **An ageing Workforce:** Councils have an ageing workforce profile in key service areas, with approximately 29% aged between 55 and 64 years old. This ageing demographic poses a risk of critical skill loss without a younger workforce ready to fill these roles. If unaddressed, councils face capacity issues in essential services, especially as recruiting younger people has been difficult in recent years.
- **Skills Shortages:** There is a shortage of skilled and qualified professionals across a range of service areas. Most pressing is in social care and social work where 97% and 91% of survey respondents identified critical workforce gaps. There are also gaps in a growing number of professional roles such as trading standards officers, planners, and environmental health officers. There are also new skills requirements that are difficult to fill. For example, councils are working to adopt digital solutions for more flexible and accessible service delivery, which requires a workforce equipped with digital skills.
- **Financial Constraints and Limited Recruitment Capabilities:** Tight budgets restrict councils' ability to offer competitive salaries and develop long-term roles, hindering efforts to retain and attract skilled workers. Competition from other sectors and limited funding for "grow your own" schemes, such as apprenticeships and internal training, are barriers to filling crucial vacancies, especially in high-need areas like social care. This financial strain limits councils' adaptability, affecting their capacity to build a future-ready workforce.

The report calls for collaborative efforts between councils, educational institutions, and Scottish Government to develop long-term workforce strategies and funding solutions that support sustained workforce investment and sustainable services across Scotland.



What does this mean for elected members?

The results from the workforce survey shows that the majority of councils are acutely aware of their workforce risks. Many councils have developed mature workforce plans, with almost all having clear action plans underpinning them. In many cases, elected members already have an oversight role for these action plans and can play an important role in ensuring these are delivered and effective workforce planning continues to develop.

This work can be further supported through strong partnership working drawing on the collective expertise across Scotland. Elected members can support this coordinated approach and play an influential role in gaining support from key agencies such as further and higher education, national skills agencies, the Scottish Government, relevant professional bodies and trade unions.

Elected members may also be well placed to make a clear ask of national government to recognise its role in helping overcome these barriers, particularly around providing long-term funding that will make these roles more attractive to candidates and allow competition with the private sector.

Promoting the attractiveness of working in local government will also be a key focus. Emphasis must be placed on attracting the younger generation into the workforce, highlighting the many varied types of roles and benefits available by working in this rewarding sector. Elected members can play a role in engaging with their communities and citizens to promote the sector.



What does 'good practice' look like in the area?

Many councils are already exploring how best to respond to the challenges they face by setting goals and taking proactive steps to achieve these. These included recruitment campaigns, upskilling and development, undertaking detailed succession planning, and working to identify factors that could lead to improved retention of existing staff.

The [report](#) highlights several examples of good practice by councils, demonstrating innovative approaches to tackling workforce challenges:

- **Digital Skills Development** - Aberdeenshire Council's Digital Champions Network was established to enhance digital literacy across council services. By training over 150 digital champions from a range of council services, partner organisations, and community groups, the council has improved digital skills across its workforce with digital champions providing further support to the rest of the workforce and residents. The network was particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the adaptation to remote working and learning. Similarly, Angus Council's Digital Learning Hub provides employees with resources to independently develop digital skills, promoting flexible, self-driven learning.
- **Engaging a Younger Workforce** - To address an ageing workforce, Inverclyde Council implemented a Workforce Refresh Programme enabling employees aged 55 to 65 to access their pension early, offering these vacancies to local young people. This initiative led to the hiring of an additional 94 young employees, supporting employment rates for younger residents. North Lanarkshire Council introduced summer placements for high school students, including in workforce shortage areas such as homecare and health and social care, giving them key frontline service experience and pathways into other positive destinations such as modern apprenticeships and other employment roles in the council.
- **Collaboration with Higher Education** – Several councils facing shortages in specialised roles are working closely with educational institutions to establish routes into these positions. For example, the University of the West of Scotland, sponsored by the Glasgow City Region Chief Executives Group, have developed a work-based planning degree, addressing critical skill shortages in planning roles across the Glasgow City Region. The degree programme is due to be launched in the Autumn of 2024 and is hoped will provide a sustainable route for the development of a pipeline of talented RTP1 qualified planners.
- **'Grow Your Own' Workforce Strategies** – Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) entitlement demonstrated successful collaboration between councils and the Scottish Government. Qualifications were quickly developed and

streamlined, funding was made available to promote posts locally, and many young people were brought into the local government workforce. Aberdeen City Council used internal traineeships to enable current employees to retrain for Early Years Practitioner roles, which helped meet local ELC demands. Programmes like [West Lothian's School Pupil ELC pilot](#) and Perth and Kinross's [Learn to Work in Early Years](#) programme also illustrate effective upskilling efforts for ELC expansion.

- **Shared Services for Resource Efficiency** - Scotland Excel's Flexible Procurement Team provides councils with a trusted supplementary resource option, promoting cost-efficiency and facilitation of good practice and collaboration. This approach reduces dependency on private sector providers and allows councils to benefit from a pool of trained procurement specialists as needed.



Key questions for elected members to consider

Elected Members could consider:

- Does your council have an up-to-date workforce plan, and is there an action plan that sits underneath this?
- Does your council have sufficient capacity to carry out workforce planning to identify gaps in the current and future workforce?
- What innovative solutions are being brought forward to address workforce gaps in your council?
- How is your council working with other key skills, employability and education agencies?
- How is your council collaborating regionally and nationally to learn from and implement best practice in workforce planning?
- How is your council making use of available data, and exploring opportunities to improve data quality, to identify areas of greatest need?

In general, this is a crucial area to ensure that councils can continue to effectively deliver services to the public. Elected members can help ensure that current and future issues are prioritised and planned for and support officers in their efforts to build a workforce fit for the future.



Further support and contacts

Email

Improvement Service – research@improvementservice.org.uk

Useful links

- Read the full report here: [Scotland's Local Government Workforce Report 2024](#)
- The IS research team can support local authorities with research related to the issues raised in report. We have also launched a new [commercial offer](#).
- The IS has a range of resources and support available related to workforce planning. You can find more information on our [website](#).

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